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October 27, 2021

Battle Creek City Commission
10 Division Street N.
Battle Creek, MI. 49014

RE: ARPA Funding

Dear Battle Creek City Commissioners:

It is truly an exciting time for the City of Battle Creek! The funds made available through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) will certainly make a positive difference in our city. As an active member of the community, the SHARE Center appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the allocation process. We are happy to continue providing insight regarding how some of those funds can be best used to support our most vulnerable residents.

As many of you know, the SHARE Center has been serving the chronically homeless population for 30 years. We provide a comprehensive array of services that meet basic needs, address barriers, and move people from crisis to stability. We have done this on a very tight budget due to the fact we do not qualify for a lot of funding opportunities available to other organizations (see narrative).

We have evolved many times over the last three decades to meet needs in the community. With the impact COVID has had on our organization and the people we serve, that time has come again, and we need your help. In fact, the Economic Roundtable estimates **chronic homelessness will increase 49% over the next four years** due to the pandemic recession.

Because of funding limitations, it is rare that the SHARE Center has an opportunity to secure federal funding. The receipt of ARPA funds would help us significantly increase our capacity to meet the growing needs caused by the pandemic. We will also be able to provide better services for homeless families.

We know there will be a lot of requests and the asks will be much greater than the available funds. However, we truly feel that there will be a very positive return on investment because of our history of resourcefulness and the ability to help people in a significant and meaningful way. With the economic impact of COVID, the basic needs and supportive services we offer will become all the more important.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to provide some input to this process. If you would like more information about our proposal or have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at robert.elchert@sharecenterbc.org or (269) 964-8133.

Sincerely,

Robert Elchert
Executive Director,
SHARE Center



Background

In 1992, a small group of individuals who had successfully recovered from mental health and addiction issues wanted to start a peer-led organization that could help others do the same. Originally located on East Michigan Ave., the Drop-In, Self-Help Center dba the SHARE Center purchased Hill Piston shop in 1996.

The SHARE Center has been providing support and hope to vulnerable people who are struggling with issues related to mental health, addiction, hunger, and homelessness for over 30 years. During this period, we have adapted many times to meet additional needs in the community. What began as a drop-in center has evolved into an organization that provides comprehensive and meaningful services to the homeless population in Calhoun County.

Who We Serve

In a typical year, we see over 5,500 unique individuals. The vast majority of the people we serve meet HUD's definition of chronically homeless. The McKinney-Vento Act defines chronically homeless as **individuals who have been homeless for at least 12 months and can be diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder, mental illness, or a developmental delay.** This is not surprising when considering 78% of the chronically homeless population have a mental health condition with 35% having a substance use disorder. Another 48% have a physical disability. These are people who often do not do well in traditional shelter settings as they need more support than what is typically offered. It is also good to have a secular option for people who might not feel comfortable going to a faith-based organization.

Overview of Services

We know that truly helping someone in a meaningful way involves more than the provision of shelter, bedding, and food. Whether it is drop-in or homeless services, we work hard towards realizing our core values of **Respect, Understanding, Inclusion, Empowerment, Advocacy, Empathy, Enrichment, and Integrity.** These are the necessary components that optimize a person's chance for success. The most important of these values is empathy. All of our staff members are trauma-informed and have had personal experience recovering from addiction, mental illness, and/or homelessness. This helps us create a non-judgmental and supportive environment while building trust with the people we serve. Developing these types of trusting relationships with our guests takes time but is vital towards their success.

Drop-In

The SHARE Center is both a drop-in and a homeless service agency. A drop-in center is governed by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) and must adhere to their guidelines. Funding for our drop-in activities and resources comes from Summit Pointe and can only be used to support our drop-in activities such as peer supports, recovery coaches, numerous support groups, and several different enrichment activities like art, yoga, exercising, and gardening. We have a library, movie

collection, a computer lab, and a community garden people can use for obtaining resources, recreation, and learning.

Homeless Services

Because most of the people we serve are chronically homeless, it makes sense for the SHARE Center to provide homeless services. We added a fully licensed commercial kitchen and cafeteria to the building about 20 years ago. **We now serve over 30,000 healthy and delicious meals to over 3,500 individuals and families in need.**

When someone comes to the SHARE Center for services, we conduct an intake session to get a better understanding of what their immediate and long-term needs are. **Our approach consists of three basic steps: 1) makes sure basic needs are being met, 2) overcome barriers, and 3) stabilize income and housing.**

Basic Needs

In addition to providing meals, we also provide a safe, non-judgmental environment, hygiene supplies, clothing, and other basic needs items. We are currently expanding these services to better meet the need of homeless families. The items we typically have available include hats, gloves, clothing, hygiene supplies, feminine hygiene supplies, blankets, and other necessities.

Overcoming Barriers

For many of the chronic homeless we serve, there are numerous steps that need to be taken if they are going to obtain and maintain stability. Simply giving someone a place without the supportive services we offer can cause recidivism. One of the key components to the success of the people we serve is removing the barriers that are keeping them trapped in poverty. The ones we see the most are: mental health and substance abuse, lack of state identification, and transportation. Our drop-in can provide the supports need to overcome mental health and addiction issues. Our homeless services include an award-winning State ID and Vital Records Program. Without an ID and/or birth certificate, people are unable to secure employment, open a banking account, or even apply for many social services. Additionally, we offer bus passes to people needing to get to and from work and medical appointments.

Stabilizing Income and Housing

As we work to meet basic needs and overcome obstacles, our **Employment and Benefits Coach** works with people to obtain appropriate employment and/or maximize benefits such as food stamps, SSI, Medicaid, etc. When barriers have been addressed and income is stabilized, the chances of finding an affordable apartment increases significantly.

Responding to Needs in the Community

The SHARE Center is an active member in several collaborative efforts designed to address problems at a systemic level. These collaborations include: Homeless Coalition of Calhoun County, Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation, Hunger-Free Calhoun, Housing Solutions Board, Homeless Health Fair/VA Stand Down Planning, and work with the Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness. This helps the SHARE Center identify and respond to various needs in the community.

County Data

- Each year, there are roughly **1,100 people** who have at least one transaction with HUD's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in Calhoun County. This includes **222 children, 207 veterans, and 234 senior citizens**. This also includes over 130 people who are chronically homeless.
- Feeding America data shows that **14.2% of the population in Calhoun Co. are food insecure**. The number is 16.4% for children.
- United Way's ALICE Report shows that **40% of the households in Calhoun Co. are financially unstable**. This includes **over 2,200 single-parent households that live below the federal poverty line**. The situations for these individuals and families was compounded by the COVID pandemic.

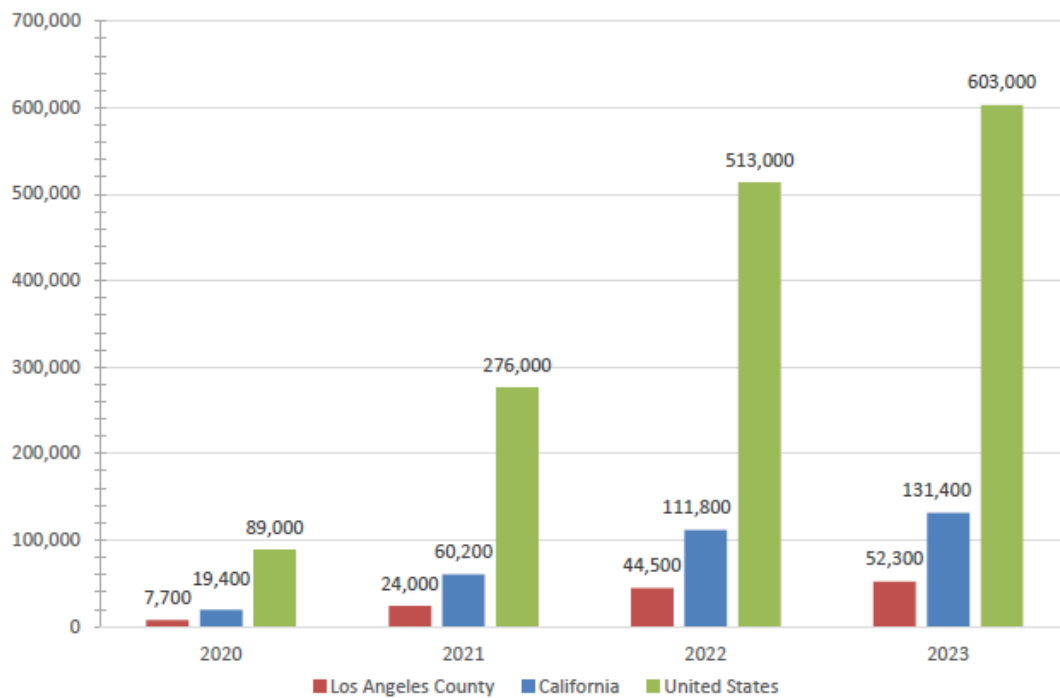
SHARE Center Annual Data

- Over 30,000 healthy and delicious meals to over 3,500 people
- 2-300 Vital Records and IDs
- Approximately 230 new people each year
- Over 3,000 loads of laundry

Impact of COVID

COVID-19 was an unprecedented crisis that disproportionately affected already vulnerable populations. Many ALICE households that were already struggling will now be facing eviction and possibly homelessness. **A recent study published by the Economic Roundtable estimates the growth in homelessness caused by the pandemic recession will be twice that of the 2008 recession.**

Figure 15: Estimated Annual Increase in Working-age Adults who will Not Have a Place of Their Own to Sleep because of Unemployment in the Pandemic Recession

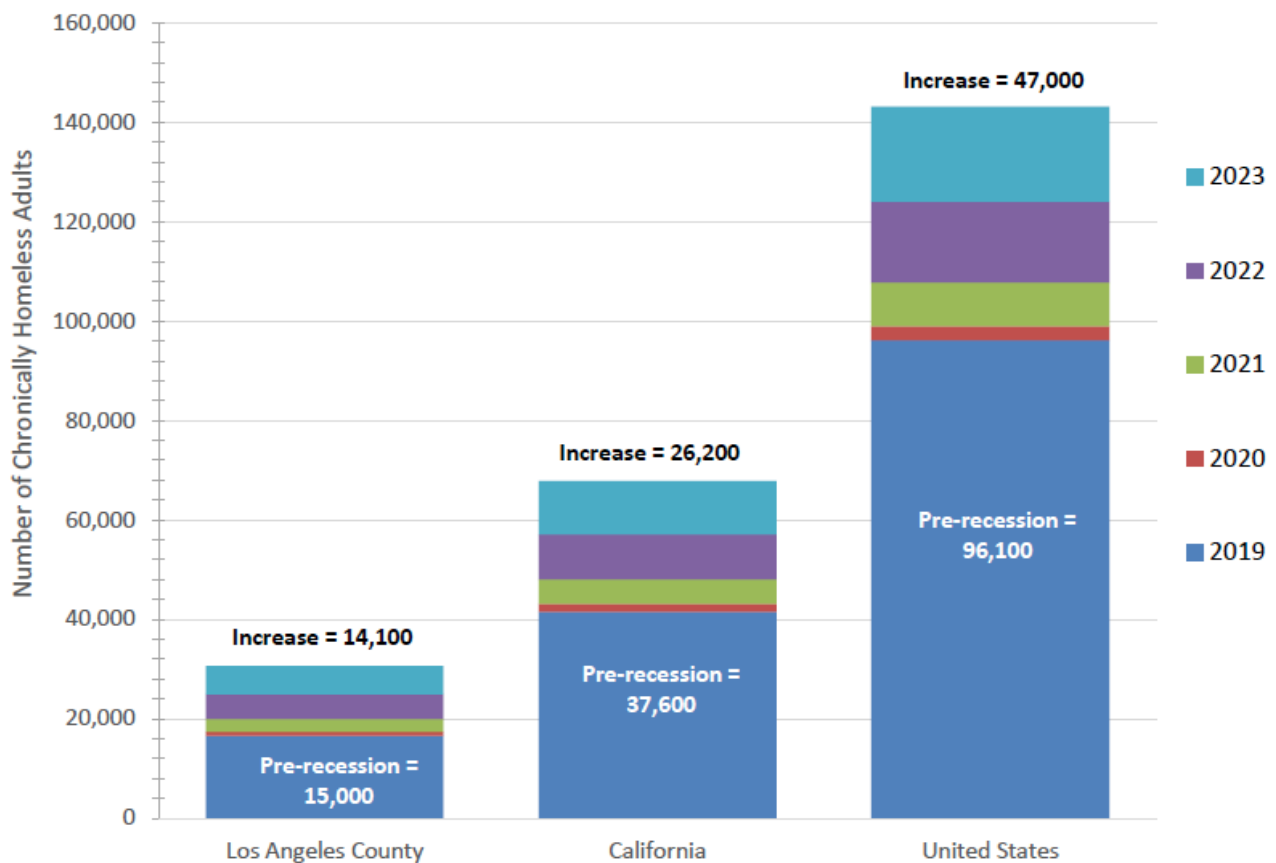


Sources: Unemployment data is from Current Population Survey basic monthly data. Homelessness data is from administrative records of Los Angeles County public assistance recipients, Economic Roundtable, "Early Intervention to Prevent Persistent Homelessness: Predictive Models for Identifying Unemployed Workers and Young Adults who become Persistently Homeless," 2019. Homelessness is defined as not having a place of your own to sleep. Unemployment estimates are from Congressional Budget Office projection, July 2020.

The study states that most of the new homeless population will be couch surfing. These will be people and families who have friends and relatives they can stay with temporarily. Hopefully, they will not need overnight shelter and the supportive services the SHARE Center offers can prevent that from happening. **We are already seeing the impact this has had on families as we are currently working with several who are living in hotels or with relatives.**

Although we see a lot of families on the cafeteria side of our building, most of the people we serve at the drop-in are chronically homeless. In order to achieve and maintain financial and housing stability, they are in need of the supportive services we offer at the drop-in and the food and other basic needs services we provide through our cafeteria. The above-mentioned study estimates **chronic homelessness in the U.S. will rise an estimated 49% over the next four years.**

Figure 17: Projected Annual Growth in Recession-Caused Chronic Homelessness



Sources: Homeless projections are derived from the Current Population Survey basic monthly data, administrative records of Los Angeles County public assistance recipients, Economic Roundtable, "Early Intervention to Prevent Persistent Homelessness: Predictive Models for Identifying Unemployed Workers and Young Adults who become Persistently Homeless," 2019, and unemployment estimates from Congressional Budget Office projection, July 2020.

The pandemic was just another example of the SHARE Center stepping up to meet needs in the community. We were grateful to have worked with City officials to utilize Full Blast so we could safely accommodate more people. Our cafeteria was still open and serving carry-out meals. Our expenses increased by over 400% as we had to purchase carry out containers, bottled water, and plastic cutlery. We were able to secure additional donations and some Disaster Relief Funds from the United Way to cover these costs. However, we will incur additional costs as the need continues to increase and there is no guarantee the DRF will be available going forward.

The first three months were the most significant as there were many people who were quarantined in hotel rooms. We were able to mobilize volunteers and secure additional funds to meet the nutritional needs of individuals and families who were immediately impacted by COVID.

- COVID (March – May 2020)
 - 15,353 carry-out meals with 4,063 delivered to people quarantined in hotels
 - 45 volunteers worked 201 hours to prepare and deliver meals

There were some important lessons learned throughout the pandemic that we can use to be better serve the community and be more prepared for whatever the next crisis might be. Although we once considered moving, we realized that our building is perfect for what we do. With some capital improvements, we will be able to better meet current and future needs in the community.

Going Forward

Better Serving Families

The above data shows the significant need for increased family-based services for homeless families. This is validated by all of the families we see at the SHARE Center. The ones who are lucky enough to have some resources often get stuck in “hotel limbo” where they spend their resources on hotel rooms and never have enough money for application fees, first month’s rent, and deposit.

The services in Battle Creek that are currently available to homeless families is woefully inadequate to meet the need. As we have in the past, the SHARE Center wants to step up to meet this need. We cannot provide them with emergency overnight shelter, but we can provide them with the type of assistance that allows them to focus more of their time and money on securing housing. We are currently in the process of securing a grant to fund a Family Case Manager who will assist families with navigating the system of care while securing income and housing. The construction of a couple of walls would allow us to create the **“Family Room”** that would be located next to the Family Case Manager. This would be an area where families could “shop” for household items, clothing, food, baby food/formula, diapers, pet food, etc. Additionally, we want to install **baby changing stations** in both bathrooms and create a **play area for children** in the cafeteria.

A More Positive Experience

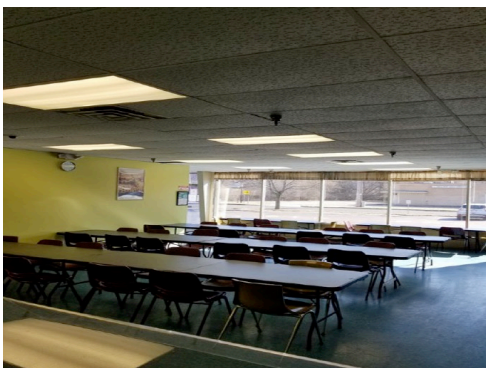


Figure 1: Current Cafeteria Space

When people come to the SHARE Center (especially families with children) we really want them to have a positive experience. Many of the people who come to us have experienced unimaginable trauma, so we are especially mindful of how what we do and appearance shapes a person’s experience at the SHARE Center. We recently obtained a piano from the BC Music Center and are looking for volunteers to play during meals. We want the children to grow up remembering the cafeteria as a restaurant and not a place where their family had to go because they were poor. The replacement of 40-year-old worn out floor tiles, painting, and some other capital improvements will go a long way towards this effort.

Additionally, we are wanting to do some landscaping so we can expand our community garden and create a green space that is optimal for relaxation and recovery. We plan to construct a pavilion to keep people out of the elements while we are not open. We also want to plant some trees, bushes, and flowers to beautify the area. Research has shown that spending time in a garden or in nature is beneficial to the recovery process. We hope to grow our garden and green space into both a resource for recovery and an entrepreneurial opportunity for our guests.



Figure 2: Future Cafeteria Space

Greater Efficiency and Capacity

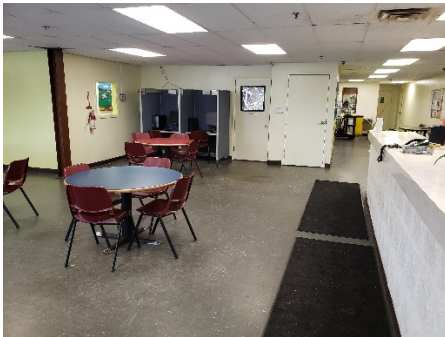


Figure 3: Current Drop-In

We have always operated on a shoestring budget. We are constantly looking for ways to increase efficiency so we can serve the maximum amount of people. A walk-in cooler would help us save time, space, and money. It would be a lot easier for us to organize food items and would use less energy than the stand-alone coolers and chest freezers we are currently using.

We would also be able to create a multi-purpose room. Currently, our support groups and enrichment activities are held in our board room, which is way too small.

Removing More Barriers

It is very difficult to obtain employment and housing if you have no place to store your belongings and have not showered in several days. We are fortunate to have a building that is perfectly laid out to install a locker room and a shower. The locker room will allow people to keep their belongings safe and secure and the shower will improve both physical and mental health.



Figure 4: Future Drop-In

SHARE Center Challenges

Reduced Funding Opportunities

The advantage of being a drop-in under MDHHS is that everything related to drop-in services is paid for through Medicaid reimbursement dollars via Summit Pointe. This funding makes up just over half of our annual budget. The problem is that since we are designated as a drop-in and do not provide overnight shelter services, we are not considered an emergency shelter. This means **we are not eligible to receive HUD and MSHDA funds that are available to the Battle Creek Homeless Shelter and the Haven of Rest.** The funding we secure to support our homeless services comes entirely through United Way and community donations. The government and United Way are really the only two reliable sources for basic needs type funding. However, because of decreased campaign revenue, our allocation has decreased by

over 20% over the last three years. Compounding this problem is the fact Brenda Hunt told us to not apply for funding from the Battle Creek Community Foundation to support our meals program.

For the last several years, the SHARE Center has inquired about Community Development Block Grants (CDBG). We were told the city does not have the capacity to administer these grants, so they no longer had them. We were surprised to learn that \$200K in CDBG funds went to the BC Homeless Shelter recently. Although we are supportive of funding for the new shelter, it is frustrating that **the SHARE Center has not been able to receive block grant funding that we need to better serve the homeless population.**

It is rare that an opportunity like the receipt of ARPA funds comes along. When these opportunities do come, we need to make sure the SHARE Center is able to continue meeting current and future needs. The funding would be used to make some capital improvements and therefore, would not need ongoing support. We have historically been a small organization with a big impact. Because we are so resourceful and have 30 years' experience, the money invested into the SHARE Center will have very favorable returns for both our guests and for the city. Recently, there has been some attention paid to an issue with the homeless loitering in parks and parking garages. If the city wants to discourage this behavior, we need to create better alternatives for the homeless where they can get the help they need in a supportive environment where they are treated with dignity and respect.

Capital Needs

In order to improve efficiency, services, and meet the growing need for services caused by the pandemic recession, we will need to make some capital improvements. In 2029, we contracted with Driven by Design to create drawings that would represent what we are envisioning. We then received a detailed estimate for construction by CSM Group. The drawings and estimate we received represent a “bells and whistles” version of the SHARE Center. It came out to be a price tag of \$1,163,939. We do not feel we need everything in the drawings and estimate. Rather, we can focus on the work that is most needed for a significantly lower cost (roughly half). Attached is a general outline of the estimated costs for many of the improvements we need to make. Because we already have architectural drawings, we will not need to pay for those and have a floor plan that future contractors can use.

The Family Room

In addition to hiring a Family Case Manager, we are wanting to construct a couple of walls to create “The Family Room”. This room will be full of resources families can use to offset the costs of basic necessities and focus more of their income on housing. Families can “shop” for clothes, food items, hygiene supplies, diapers, baby food/formula, pet food, and household goods like pots and pans.

Locker Room

One of the many challenges homeless people have is not having a safe place to keep their belongings. Important items like IDs, supplies, and money often get stolen. It is also difficult to carry around large duffle bags that contain everything you own. The construction of a few walls in our loading dock area and the purchase of lockers and locks would allow us to securely hold people's belongings while they look for work and housing or run other errands.

Showers

Another barrier homeless people face is not being able to shower. This has a negative impact on both physical and mental health. It also makes it very difficult to secure employment and housing when you have not showered in days. There are some options for showers, but the demand exceeds the supply. Because we serve chronically homeless people who sometimes do not feel comfortable going to other service providers, we want to be able to address as many barriers as we can on site.

Laundry Improvements

Similar to not showering, not having clean clothes can impact a person's mental and physical health. It can also be a barrier towards obtaining employment and housing. We currently do roughly 3,000 loads of laundry each year using an old washer and dryer that you would use at home. There is not much life left in them and having commercial grade machines would save money and time and would allow us to do more laundry for individuals and families.

Baby Changing Stations

As part of an effort to better serve families, we want to install baby changing stations in both bathrooms on the cafeteria side of our building.

ADA Upgrades

We cannot truly be a barrier free welcoming environment if there are people who cannot completely use our facility. We have several people with mobility issues who would benefit from automatic door openers and accessible drinking fountains. Upgrading our drinking fountains would also save us money in that guests can fill up water bottles rather than us giving them bottled water.

ARPA Request

The capital needs and expansion of services comes to roughly \$314,000. This makes up the bulk of our request and are one-time expenses that do not require ongoing funding. Another \$50,000 would allow us to improve our Community Meals Program by hiring more staff and offsetting operational costs for 1-2 years. We feel this will buy us enough time to secure other funding. Most importantly, it will allow us to respond to the growing number of homeless individuals and families over the next several years. By supporting the SHARE Center, we can prevent many people from becoming homeless and help those who are homeless get back on their feet. We can create an environment where people want to go for help and ideally avoid having the large encampments seen in other cities. **The total ask for ARPA funds from the SHARE Center is \$364,000.**

Conclusion

The SHARE Center really is a small organization with a huge impact. Having 30 years of experience helping people overcome barriers and a trauma-informed staff that understands the complexities of homelessness is what makes the SHARE Center truly unique. As more people experience poverty and homelessness from the pandemic, it will be all the more important to support the SHARE Center as we assist individuals and families in crisis.